Christian weapons at the forge of romance: a study of some aspects of the expression of religious experience in selected works of George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, Charles Dickens and George Eliot with special reference to early nineteenth century evangelical tracts

Thesis

UNRESTRICTED

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CHRISTIAN WEAPONS AT THE FORGE OF ROMANCE. A STUDY OF SOME ASPECTS OF THE EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN SELECTED WORKS OF GEORGE MACDONALD, CHARLES KINGSLEY, CHARLES DICKENS AND GEORGE ELIOT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY EVANGELICAL TRACTS.

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CHRISTIAN WEAPONS AT THE FORGE OF ROMANCE

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at some ways of describing religious experience in the works of selected Victorian novelists and in early nineteenth century evangelical tracts. I show that the novelists used formulae in their descriptions similar to those used didactically in the tracts to convey specific points of Christian doctrine

I argue that these formulae, used in the different context of the novels, with a different purpose and emphasis, hampered the development of an analysis of religious experience more appropriate to the novels' freer context. I have accordingly selected novelists whose work reflects a spectrum of attitudes towards orthodox Christianity, but maintains an interest in it - novelists who might be expected to want to analyse religious experience freshly.

The comparison between tracts and novels is made via the formulae. I have also suggested a comparison based on method - the tracts describe religious experience in terms of universally applicable doctrine, a method I have called tract, while the novelists move towards a fantasy mode in which the individual's inner experience of God can be accomodated. The distinction between the methods is explored and developed throughout the thesis and is an essential methodological tool.

The thesis is arranged in six chapters with a a general introduction and a conclusion. The first five chapters explore formulae common to tracts and novels: the influence of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, conversions, deathbeds, the significance attached to children and to poverty. The sixth chapter examines ways in which an idea of God may be developed in the *tract* and the *fantasy* modes. In each chapter I examine a number of tracts and two or three selected novels.

Through the thesis I demonstrate that the reliance on inappropriate formulae often accounts for major flaws in the novels I examine and that the distinction between *tract* and *fantasy* can open the way for a more complex engagement with the religious content of the novels.

Acknowledgements

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CONTENTS

TEXTS

Novels

The editions of the major novels referred to in the thesis are listed below. Where there is no standard critical edition I have used the editions that were most readily available.

Charles Dickens I have used the Oxford Illustrated Dickens except where a novel is available in the Clarendon edition. The edition used in each case is indicated by a reference in the footnotes.

George Eliot I have used the Penguin English Library edition except in the case of The Mill on the Floss where I have used the Oxford edition edited by Gordon S Haight (Oxford,1980)

Charles Kingsley Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet an autobiography, edited by Elizabeth A Cripps (Oxford, 1983)

Madam How and Lady Why (London 1899)

Two Years Ago (London,1902)

The Water Babies (London,1872)

Yeast: a Problem (London,1851)

George MacDonald At the Back of the North Wind (London,1950)

Lilith; a Romance (Tring,1982)

Phantastes ; a faerie romance (London,1894)

The Princess and Curdie (London,1978)

The Princess and the Goblin (London,1978)

Stephen Archer and other Tales (London,1833)

Tracts

Editions of tracts are particularly difficult to date accurately. Individual tracts carry no dates and tract tales give no indication of the date of first publication. In addition, tract societies revised the content of tracts for new editions. I have used a number of different collections held in the British Library and, for the sake of convenience, referred to editions in my possession of Legh Richmond's Annals of the Poor and Mrs Sherwood's The History of the Fairchild Family. In the list that follows I give first the publication date of the edition used and then the date of the first edition where this is known.

Collections

The Cheap Repository Tracts, collected in three volumes, longer tracts, shorter tracts,and verse. (London,1796). The tracts first appeared in 1795

Narrative Tracts Moral and Religious by Mrs Sherwood Mrs Cameron, Old Humphrey, etc, second series (London c1860) Some of the tracts by Mrs Sherwood date from the 1820's

Religious Tract Society, First Series Tracts (London, 1830?-1863). The first series tracts first began appearing in 1799

Narrative Tracts (London,1830 - 1853)

Second Series Tracts (London 1825-1830). These tracts were designed for distribution by hawkers. They first began appearing in 1808

Houlstons Series of Tracts (Wellington c.1825 - 1846)

Tract Tales

Legh Richmond, Annals of the Poor (London,1898) The three tracts, 'The Negro Servant', 'Jane, the Young Cottager' and 'The Dairyman's Daughter' included in this volume first appeared individually in a periodical The Christian Guardian between 1809 and 1811

Mrs Sherwood, The History of the Fairchild Family; or the Child's Manual; being a collection of stories calculated to show the importance and effects of a religious education, a facsimile edition of the first volume, published in 1818 (London, nd) The History of the Fairchild Family was first published in 1818 and revised and republished with an additional two volumes in 1847. (The second volume was published in 1842)

ABBREVIATIONS

I have used the initials RTS to refer to the Religious Tract Society.

Throughout the thesis I have used a lower case e for 'evangelical' except where I have wanted to refer specifically to the evangelical wing of the Anglican church.

I have not assumed that the male pronoun necessarily includes the female. To avoid clumsy repetition I have sometimes used one form of the pronoun and sometimes the other.

THE TRACTS

As it seems likely that the tracts on which much of this thesis is based may be unfamiliar I include here a brief explanation of their production, distribution and nature as well as my criteria for choosing those with which I deal.

Tracts became a popular way of spreading Christian teaching in the early nineteenth century. Evangelical groups particularly siezed on them as a means of presenting the need for conversion to a society that they feared was composed largely of nominal Christians. Tract societies were set up by interested individuals to co-ordinate the publication and distribution of the tracts. One of these, the Religious Tract Society (RTS), an interdemoninational group founded in 1799, had circulated 4,381,000 tracts in the first nine years of its existence[1] and went on extending its operations throughout the century.

The RTS exercised a strict control over the content of their tracts. They were anxious to see that

> Pure, essential and saving gospel truths are ... introduced into every Tract; in connection with a composition intended to be plain, striking and entertaining. 2

A typical RTS tract was eight pages long and consisted of either a short homily on some aspect of Christian doctrine or a short story designed to bring the same teaching home to the reader more acceptably. It is with the latter, narrative tracts that I am concerned

in the thesis.

The tracts were chiefly distributed as chap books had been through hawkers. Some were Christians who made a feature of selling only tracts, others were ordinary pedlars employed by the tract society.[3] By using these men the tract societies aimed not only at getting their message into the homes of the rural poor, but also at counteracting 'the filth' of the chapbooks. The RTS designed a series of tracts particularly intended to appeal to those who might ordinarily read chapbooks.

Individual evangelicals were also encouraged to distribute tracts as part of their Christian responsibility. One of the early RTS tracts describes such a tract distributor:

> He always keeps by him a store of tracts ... He gives them to his poor neighbours and to people who call at his house. When he walks out, he tries to get into conversation with those he meets, and puts a tract in their hands. He gives them to children to read to their parents. When he travels, religious tracts are a necessary part of his baggage ... At every turnpike he hands the gate-keeper one. When he stops at a friend's house, he presents them to the children and servants. Besides these personal distributions, he sends parcels of tracts to ministers of his acquaintance for them to distribute in a similar manner. [4]

The description indicates the audience for whom the tracts were chiefly intended - the rural poor, servants and children of all classes. Another target audience were soldiers and sailors, but the omission of any material for the new urban poor is a noticeable gap.

Although tracts were deliberately distributed to children it was some time before the RTS prepared a

series of narrative tracts addressed particularly to them. As the passage quoted above indicates both children and their elders were expected to read and respond to the same tracts. When the RTS did produce their first children's series they simply used those of their existing tracts that they felt would appeal most readily to children.[5] One or two early tract writers such as Mrs Sherwood and her sister, Mrs Cameron, did however write deliberately for children. Their stories however have all the doctrinal features of more general tracts dealing as they do with death, conversion and the importance of Bible reading all in the context of a well regulated domestic life. I have therefore felt justified in making no distinction in quotation between these tracts and those intended for a wider audience.

There is, unfortunately, little direct evidence of how the tracts were received. RTS circulation figures indicate that vast numbers were produced and distributed, but there is little evidence that they were actually read. However there are some accounts of the effects of tracts on readers. Legh Richmond, the author of Annals of the Poor

> was informed of thirty instances in which it was acknowledged to have been instrumental to the conversion of its readers, of whom one was a female convict at Botany Bay [6]

The RTS annual reports include records of individuals' gratitude for the tracts. An indirect piece of evidence

that suggests that the tracts were read can be found in one of Houlston's tracts, 'Our Own Times' in which a tract distributor notes that through reading Christian works without real understanding, people are talking a religious language, but not attempting to lead real Christian lives.[7]

For my thesis I have selected tracts from among the most frequently published and widely circulated because these are the ones most likely to have been read and therefore potentially have helped to establish the familiarity of the characters and and situations that make a religious 'structure of feeling' in the novels. ('Structure of feeling' is Raymond williams' term for recurring narrative devices in the literature of a period which reflect common contemporary patterns for structuring and explaining the experience of the world.)[8] I have drawn on tracts by the RTS which were widely circulated and those published by Houlstons whose tract series included many tracts by the popular writers Mrs Sherwood and Mrs Cameron. I have also looked at the early series, Cheap Repository Tracts instituted by Hannah More, which became immediately famous and was constantly reprinted So great was the impact of one tract, 'The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain', that Wilberforce commented that 'he would rather present himself before Heaven with the Shepherd in his hand than with Peveril of the Peak'.[9] I look, too, at Legh Richmond's Annals of the Poor which were

among the most frequently reprinted tracts of the period. His biographer recorded that, 'four millions of copies are said to have been circulated in the nineteen languages into which it has been translated.' [10]

All the tracts that I have looked at are early ones, that is first published before 1840. There are two reasons for this. The first is that by the end of the 1830's the tone of many of the tracts changed, apparently influenced by the growing familiarity and acceptability of the novel form. The stories become less simple and less plainly didactic. The second reason is that, while I cannot prove that the novelists and their readers read and were influenced by the tracts it seems more than likely that they were - and if this is the case, then for the middle class writers and readers tracts would have been mainly encountered in their childhood. It therefore seemed appropriate to concentrate on tracts that would have been in circulation in time to form part of the early reading of novelists and their public.

The Tracts

1 Report of the Committee of the Religious Tract Society, May 12, 1808, p7

2 The Origina and Progress of the London Religious Tract Society (London,1803) p8

3 An account of tract distribution is given by Sheila Haines in 'Am I my brother's keeper? Victorian tract societies and their work,1840-1875', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex,1980.

4 RTS First Series Tracts, no 1, p6

5 A series of reprints for children was first prepared by the RTS in 1809. A specially written series was not published until 1814. William Jones, A Jubilee Memorial of the Religious Tract Society 1799-1850 (London,1850)

6 T S Grimshawe, A Memoir of the Rev Legh Richmond, AM (London,1828),pp317,318

7 Houlstons Series of Tracts, no 30

8 The Long Revolution (London,1961)

9 Recorded by Charlotte M Yonge in Hannah More (London,1888) p113

10 A Memoir of the Rev Legh Richmond, p298

INTRODUCTION

Critics of the nineteenth century novel have noted how certain narrative formulae appear across a wide range of contemporary productions. Raymond Williams, for example, pointed out, among other devices, that of the alcoholic or insane husband or wife who first tests the heroine's or hero's fidelity and then dies conveniently to clear the way for a'marriage of true minds'.[1] More recently, Barry Qualls has drawn attention to the hero or heroine as pilgrim motif, citing novels by Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens and George Eliot as well as Carlyle's Sartor Resartus.[2] In this dissertation I examine some narrative formulae and stereotypes which have a wide distribution in nineteenth century fiction and which are particularly associated with religious experience.

I have selected formulae that appear not only in the mid-century novels with which I deal, but also in the narrative tracts and longer tract tales published at the beginning of the nineteenth century by various evangelical organisations and publishing houses. These formulae include model conversions and deaths, plagiarisms of The Pilgrim's Progress and stereotypes of pious children and the deserving poor.

I have no wish to prove that the tracts influenced the novelists because of the presence of similar

formulae in both. Although it seems reasonable to assume that the authors with whom I deal, as well as the majority of their readers, would have become familiar with narrative tracts in their childhood such connections are notoriously difficult to prove.[3] My thesis is rather that, in the mid-century novels the devices had none of the strict doctrinal content that characterised their use in the tracts. In the novels their meaning tends to be vague - the devices make the signal, 'religious feeling here,' rather than conveying specific religious teaching. Nevertheless, the authors with whom I deal were anxious to make statements about the nature and value of religious experience. I want to suggest that they were hampered in their efforts to do so by the use of inadequate devices, which while they lacked doctrinal content in the context of the novel, were still associated by their form with a specific Protestant Christian view point. To refer to my title, I look at what in fact happened when the weapons of Christian warfare were brought to the forge of romance.[4]

I have looked particularly at religious formulae in novels by George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald - all writers who were roughly contemporary and who were concerned for different reasons to present a view of religious experience in their novels. All four writers were

active in the mid-century, although Dickens began publishing earlier and MacDonald continued production until the end of the century. I have concentrated on works by all four writers from the 1850's and 1860's in order to make historically meaningful comparisons. In the case of MacDonald I have included some later works, since his approach and his ideas were established by the 1860's and underwent little change.

George Eliot approached the problem of religious experience from a consciously post-Christian position, founded on Feuerbach. Dickens' religious position is less clear. Dennis Walder has suggested that he was a believer,[5] but his novels, in spite of his protest to Macrae,[6] do not manifest any definite doctrinal or philosophical position. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is in his novels that the religious cliches I examine find their most exuberant expression.

Both Kingsley and MacDonald wrote from avowedly Christian positions, but their use of the narrative devices remains very much on the level of feeling rather than doctrine and consequently, as I shall suggest, the general content of their message is affected.

Religious experience, that is the experience of something perceived by the character concerned to affect their spirit, and evoke feelings of awe, tends

in the novels to be focused in descriptions that attempt to open up the character's inner life. MacDonald particularly explores inner psychic landscapes in his novels, often casting them as fantasies in which the protagonist ranges through another world whose geography and inhabitants embody his or her spiritual experience. The emphasis on religious experience as an inner, essentially subjective event connects with the use made of the religious formulae. Their emptiness of specific doctrinal meaning and message of undefined religious feeling invites an exploration of the religious imagination rather than the specific teachings of the Christian faith.

In my discussion I have used the term fantasy to describe this emphasis on the individual imagination as the seat of religious experience. In order to identify the use of the formulae as instruments of such fantasy rather than as instruments for communicating doctrine I have contrasted their use in the novels with their use in the early evangelical tracts where encounter with God is perceived primarily in terms of doctrine. The distinction between fantasy and the mode of the tract writers which I have termed tract is thus of great importance in the development of my argument.

The relation of the religious formulae to the development of an exploration of inner religious

life might suggest that the novelists' use of the devices is more subtle than my argument has claimed. Certainly sometimes the novelists do make an interesting and complex exploration of the nature of religious experience, using the absence of doctrinal definition to leave the reader uncertain whether the experience recorded is entirely the product of the character's psyche or dependent on some external, transcendent intervention. However, the limitations of the formulae in terms of their essentially Christian structure and their determining familiarity remain,ultimately hampering any new expression of religious experience and constricting any serious reappraisal of its nature and value.

Anyone who embarks on a discussion of religious experience should make plain their own religious position which will inevitably affect the way in which they assess the explorations and conclusions of others. I have no wish to lay claim to an impossible neutrality - I have approached the problem from a believer's position, and this affects my judgement both of George Eliot's post-Christian approach and of those Christian writers whose use of formulae, I feel, distorts or narrows their Christian message.

NOTES

Introduction

1 Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (London, 1981)

2 Barry V Qualls, The Secular Pilgrim of Victorian Fiction; the Novel as Book of Life (Cambridge, 1982)

3 Both Dennis Walder in Dickens and Religion (London, 1981) and Samuel J Pickering in The Moral Tradition in English Literature (New England,1976) have suggested convincingly that The Old Curiosity Shop was influenced by tracts such as Legh Richmond's Annals of the Poor

4 'The weapons of Christian warfare were never sharpened at the forge of romance' George Eliot to Maria Lewis, March 1839, George Eliot Letters, edited by Gordon Haight (London,1954), volume 1, pp21 -24 (p23)

5 Dickens and Religion (1981)

6 'when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master ...' Dickens to David Macrae, in David Macrae, Amongst the Darkies and other papers (Glasgow,1876) p127

CHAPTER ONE

The Christian journey - constructing a supernatural dimension

A recurring problem for those novelists who wished to explore religious experience without committing themselves to a definite doctrinal position was the creation of a spiritual setting in which their characters' religious experiences could be displayed. In Dombey and Son (1848) Dickens surmounts the problem over Paul's death by leaving it open to the reader to decide how far Paul's 'heavenly vision' has foundation in a transcendent reality, and how far it is simply the result of his feverish imagination reshaping his experience. Another solution, adopted by both Dickens and George Eliot, was to use the Christian metaphor of life as a journey towards heaven to structure their novels.[1] The metaphor could be adapted so that attention was focused on life as a journey rather than on heaven as a goal. In this way life could be presented as spiritually purposeful, and exploration of the characters' religious experience could take place in the context of seeing their lives' events as part of a spiritual progress. In this chapter I look particularly at the use made of the metaphor in The Mill on the Floss (1860) where George Eliot draws on both The Pilgrim's Progress and the parable of the prodigal son for journey metaphors. I argue that it is the artificiality of the supernatural structure she creates

that is largely responsible for the notable failure of the novel's conclusion.

Before examining The Mill on the Floss in detail I wish to consider the general familiarity of the metaphors in the nineteenth century and to consider their use in the tracts. In doing so I shall identify some of the limitations of the metaphors as they were interpreted in evangelical thought in order to provide a contrast with the more sophisticated way in which George Eliot uses them.

The Pilgrim's Progress [2] was important to early evangelical writers because it provided a justification for fiction. Sarah Stickney, in her essay, 'An apology for fiction' with which she prefaces an attempt to teach Christian truth through short stories, comments:

> Fiction may be compared to a key, which opens many minds that would be closed against a sermon. Nor is it without authority in the writings of sincere and zealous Christians. The wide range of allegory affords innumerable subjects for instruction and delight, and many a weary wanderer through the valley of the shadow of death, has been cheered by the remembrance of Bunyan's pilgrim. [3]

As Sarah Stickney's comment implies, The Pilgrim's Progress was acceptable because its fiction was not lies but allegory, a point made by Bunyan himself:

> 'But it is feigned,' What of that I trow?
> Some men by feigning words as dark as mine
> Make truth to spangle, and its rays to shine [4]

For the tract writers, The Pilgrim's Brogress did not provide one useful central metaphor, but a complete allegorical method. That it is an underlying

source of allegory in the tracts is apparent from the number of tracts in which the allegories are directly modelled on The Pilgrim's Progress . Mrs Sherwood for example produced two new versions of The Pilgrim's Progress, The Indian Pilgrim designed for Indian converts, and The Infant's Progress in which the pilgrims are all children.[5] Hannah More included allegories which recall the book in her Cheap Repository Tracts, one is entitled 'The Pilgrims' while the other, 'Bear ye one another's burdens or the Valley of Tears' uses the idea of men and women as pilgrims with burdens which they have to help each other to carry. [6]Most unlikely, perhaps is Mrs Cameron's tract,'The Railroad' in which the false pilgrims give up walking along the narrow way and take the train instead. Inevitably the train crashes and the passengers are killed. [7]

While these and other writers imitated Bunyan's allegorical method, they unfortunately failed to imitate at the same time what George Eliot recognised as his 'simple, vigorous, rhythmic'style [8]or the imaginative potential of his allegorical world. In Bunyan's book the folk tale characters and motifs are still able to operate to some extent in their own right, unhampered by their allegorical meaning. As a result the reader's interpretation of the meaning can be more extensive. The climb up the Hill Difficulty, for example, expresses the Christian's struggle after holiness and yet remains a classic fairy tale test, and the picture of any human struggle towards some

elusive achievement. Bunyan also maintains a dream like quality in The Pilgrim's Progress. The encounters along the road, for example, appear both significant an random; the sequence of events has all the arbitrarines of dreaming with an underlying sense of a felt but indefinably coherent logic. The countryside on either side of the road is unexplored but potentially swarming with unknown messengers of danger and promise.

If we turn to, for example, The Infant's Progress, we can see how crude the tract writers' allegory was by comparison. In Mrs Sherwood's story every element is subordinated to Evangelical doctrine. The Infant's Progress is not simply the original retold with children as protagonists, new characters and events are introduced that are designed to improve Bunyan's theolog rather than the narrative. 'Inbred-Sin' is introduced as the foster brother of the child pilgrims. He leads them into trouble at every turn, and can only be shaken off when the children finally cross the river. The concept robs the story of the drama of the characters' personal struggles and the sense of their progress and growing moral strength that are features of The Pilgrim's Progress . The children's best efforts are doomed to failure before they begin, and any success at subduing 'Inbred-Sin' comes less from their struggle than from the determination of their guardians. From an Evangelical viewpoint however the character improves the story doctrinally, illuminating and defining a point

about human nature according to the evangelical system which Bunyan had left obscure.

The setting of The Infant's Progress is broadly the same as Bunyan's - the road from the City of Destruction to the New Jerusalem. However, Mrs Sherwood's story contains a larger number of incidents and encounters which take place in much more circumstantially described surroundings; a tendency to define and control events typical of the tracts is in evidence:

> Now I saw, in my dream, that the children were come to the gate of a garden, in which stood the house of Indulgence; and the gate being open, they entered without hesitation. And as they passed through the garden, although it was nearly dark, they could perceive that it abounded with flowers and fruits. But the fruit of the garden was not of a salutory sort; moreover it grew in the midst of many weeds and wild shrubs: for there was no care taken either to prune the shrubs or to clean the ground. 9

Every detail is forced to carry a Christian message. While Bunyan managed not to overburden the folk tale topology of his allegorical world with more Christian doctrine than it could bear, Mrs Sherwood forces her characters and incidents to carry all the doctrinal messages she can think of so that they can never be perceived as anything more than a transcription of her theology.

In their insistence on dogma tract writers who used allegory were capable of destroying the rich potential meaning not only of the marvellous worlds they constructed, but also, ironically, of the biblical material that they were trying to present. Mrs Cameron's tract,

'The Two Lambs'[10] manages to destroy by crude handling, the image of Christ the Good Shepherd as a subject for any but the most narrow meditation. The two lambs, Peace and Inexperience are rescued from a lion by the Shepherd who is wounded in the fight. His blood washes the dirt from their fleeces, which is sound evangelical doctrine, but makes no sense on the level of the story. The shepherd is not allowed to function as a real shepherd and so contribute to the reader's understanding of what may be meant by Christ's comparison (John 10.4). Instead he is made to convey doctrine important to the evangelicals, but not part of the image's original function. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, but he does not wash them in his blood.

Although the tract writers went to Bunyan primarily for his allegorical method the central metaphor of the journey was embedded in evangelical cliche and recurs in all the tracts. An older Christian in one tract is referred to as, 'an aged pilgrim' who is waiting for the summons to 'cross the river'.[11] The Pilgrim's Progress appears to have been so familiar that writers could refer to its central image without comment. Wilberforce writes in A Practical View:

> He (the Christian) knows also that, to the very end of life, his journey will be through a country in which he has many enemies; that his way is beset with snares; that temptations throng around to seduce him from his course ... that the very air disposes to drowsiness. 12

While Legh Richmond remarks in Annals of the Poor:

> I wish that every Christian pilgrim in the way of grace, as he walks through the Lord's pastures, would try to lead at least one little child by the hand. 13

Although the tract writers accepted the goal of the Christian pilgrim as easily as they accepted the idea of life as a journey towards it, they nevertheless had some difficulty conveying the nature of the goal in their tracts. This was because tract writers were anxious to set their work in everyday surroundings that they hoped their readers would be able to identify with. Stories set in the cottages of the poor or the servants' quarters of wealthier houses did not lend themselves to the inclusion of a description of the New Jerusalem as Bunyan's pilgrims glimpsed it:

> It was builded of pearls and precious stones, also the street thereof was paved with gold, so that by reason of the natural glory of the City, and the reflection of the sunbeams upon it, Christian with desire fell sick .. 14

In the tracts the literal representation of the heavenly goal is impossible if the story is to remain tied to life on this earth. The most that can be done is to show the 'pilgrims' prepared and ready for death, but to follow them 'across the river' was as difficult for tract writers as it was for the less committed later novelists.

Occasionally writers, particularly of The Cheap Repository Tracts, narrate a Christian life as a progress from disaster to success, but the spiritual

achievement of The Pilgrim's Progress is transposed to a steady but limited climb up the social ladder. Betty Brown, the heroine of 'Betty Brown the St Giles Orange Girl', starts life as a street urchin, but eventually, 'by industry and piety, rose in the world, till at length she came to keep that handsome sausage-shop near the Seven Dials, and was married to an honest hackney-coachman.'[15] Charles Jones the footman rises by the exercise of similar virtues to the post of bailiff with his own farm and a pious wife to help him run it.[16] By expressing progress in this way the narrative remains on a mundane level, but, however much the protagonists' piety is insisted on, the goal has become worldly - more suited to one of Bunyan's false professors than to a Christian pilgrim. Tract writers' reluctance to engage with a supernatural dimension led them to express the system of reward and punishment inherent in their doctrine in terms of this life rather than the next.

For this reason perhaps tract writers appear to have been more at home structuring their stories round a different Christian journey metaphor, that of the prodigal son. Modelled on the parable (Luke 15. 11-32) this journey is undertaken initially through rebellion rather than a spiritual awakening and its conclusion is the return of the wanderer sadder and wiser to his old home, not the triumphant arrival of the pilgrim at the celestial city.

This pattern accommodated itself much more easily to the tract writers' wish to avoid dwelling on the supernatural. There was no need to paint a glowing celestial city, or compromise with some temporal substitute. Instead the repentant sinner could make his or her way back to the scenes and practice of early piety. The evangelicals were convinced that a pious upbringing was one of the most secure foundations of a stable religious life. A frequently quoted text was Proverbs 22:6, 'Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old,he will not depart from it.'[17] Tracts based on the prodigal son encouraged parents to expect that the religious upbringing they gave their children would be fruitful, even if for a time the child appeared to backslide. In addition, since the prodigal's journey pivots on the change of heart that makes him go home, the narrative pattern allowed the writers to introduce dramatic conversion stories. Such stories were always regarded as valuable in the tracts because it was hoped that they might encourage the unconverted reader to repent.

A representative example of this type of tract is Mrs Sherwood's 'The Hop-picking'.[18] In this tale the prodigal is a woman, Bessy Collins. Bessy selfishly leads the life of an invalid, driving her mother and her pious sister, Annie, to their deaths as they exhaust themselves looking after her. When they die she has

to leave home to look for work, and it is at this point that her journey begins. She takes a job as a servant, but, finding the work too hard, leaves to get married. Her laziness as a wife and mother threatens both her relationship with her husband and the welfare of her baby, named Annie after her sister. The family descends into poverty, and Bessy, like the prodigal forced to keep pigs, is forced by her husband to go hop-picking. She is employed on a farm in the village where she was born, as it were actually carrying out the prodigal son's intention of becoming a hired servant of his father's. Both she and the baby fall sick while she is working, and she is overheard lamenting over the child by her sister's lover who still lives nearby. The lover, William, is a Christian, and like the prodigal son's father, he takes Bessy and the child home. He and his mother care for them, restoring both to health and converting Bessy to Christianity and uniting her with her husband.

As 'The Hop-picking' emphasises, an essential part of the prodigal son narrative is the return home to scenes of childhood happiness. It is here, rather than in 'the far country' that, in Mrs Sherwood's story, the conversion experience takes place. Such a dependence on the power of early scenes for good is usually regarded as Wordsworthian rather than evangelical, but, as this story shows, it has a place in the tract tradition. It is for this reason that when the formula

can be identified in The Mill on the Floss a comparison with the tracts seems as justifiable as a comparison with Wordsworth, particularly in the light of George Eliot's familiarity with evangelical fiction, evidenced in her use of it in Scenes of Clerical Life. (1858)

In The Mill on the Floss a number of overlapping narrative motifs are used to structure the novel. While tract writers could be confident that a narrative pattern chosen from the Bible needed no justification but could be regarded as being an essentially true description of the way human lives are ordered, the author of The Mill on the Floss has no such certainty. George Eliot presents her characters struggling to impose order on their lives by constructing individual systems through which to perceive and measure events - the Dodson respectability for example, or Mr Dean's belief in 'business':

> 'The world isn't made of pen, ink and paper, and if you've to get on in the world, young man, you must know what the world's made of. Now the best chance for you'ud be to have a place on a wharf or in a warehouse, where you'd learn the smell of things ...' 19

The tract writers wanted to convince their readers that the patterns by which they structured events in their stories had an objective authenticity - the readers too could and should begin to align their lives with the same patterns. In The Mill on the Floss the creation of systems to explain experience is seen as subjective and it is frequently mocked. It is mocked

particularly in the character of Mr Glegg who has become absorbed in tracing connections between the animal life in his garden and topical events:

> before the burning of York Minster there had been mysterious serpentine marks on the leaves of the rose-trees, together with an unusual prevalence of slugs, which he had been puzzled to know the meaning of, until it flashed upon him with this melancholy conflagration. (p105)

This meditation in which he inflates the insignificant animal life of his garden to the stature of prophetic signs parodies the tendency of all human beings to see the events of their lives fitting into some cosmic, transcendent order. Not only is Mr Glegg mistaken in the significance he attaches to slugs and rose leaves, he has missed the opportunity that his original curiosity offered him of studying these 'zoological phenomena' scientifically; a study which to many educated Victorians would have seemed more rational and fruitful.

Mr Glegg's false position was one that George Eliot was anxious to avoid as she interpreted the lives of her characters. They are to be a subject of scientific observation and study. In the well known chapter, 'A Variation of Protestantism unknown to Bossuet' she makes her stance clear - she is 'observing these people narrowly', they are 'emmet-like'(p 238). As 'zoological phenomena' should be, Dodsons and Tullivers are classified according to family characteristics.

In spite of George Eliot's intellectual commitment to the methodology of early social science, the stance

cannot be maintained. The individuals whose history she tells still demand a spiritual context and direction of some kind in order to be established as fully human, and it is, as always, part of George Eliot's purpose that we should recognise the humanity of her characters. She struggles in The Mill on the Floss to supply a humanising context for her characters as well as one that places them as zoological phenomena. As a writer she is threatened by the tension between her interest in the scientific study of her characters and her commitment to developing them as individual men and women who, as individuals, can be regarded as purposeful and significant.

In her attempt to suggest a teleogical order for her characters without committing herself to a Christian position George Eliot supplies the reader with a number of ordering patterns. The romance conflict between the fair haired and dark haired heroines is hinted at in the physical descriptions and later rivalry of Maggie and Lucy. The point is underlined in Maggie's reading of Corinne and the novels of Walter Scott and her comments on them:

> I'm determined to read no more books where the blond haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them - If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance - I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora Mac-Ivor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. (p292)

The legend of the Virgin of St Ogg's is also used to provide a pattern which will impose an order and a goal on Maggie's life. The stories of The Pilgrim's Progress

and the prodigal son are also offered as keys for interpreting Maggie's history. In the rest of this chapter I shall look particularly at the way George Eliot uses and develops references to these two Christian journeys.

The Pilgrim's Progress is a dominant theme in the novel. It is introduced into the story in the early chapters as part of Maggie's childhood reading;the fourth book is named after one of its events,'The Valley of Humiliation', and the beginning and end of the novel echo the beginning and end of Bunyan's book. Both books begin with the narrators dreaming their characters, both conclude with the protagonists struggling in a river of death. The attention focused on The Pilgrim's Progress by these references suggests that it is to be viewed as a central structuring device in the novel. However the references are hedged in with reservations which, while they allow the reader to relate the pattern of The Pilgrim's Progress to the events of the novel, prevent her from applying it with any sense that the pattern is more objectively 'true' than any other.

All the patterns that George Eliot offers in The Mill on the Floss are generated by the characters themselves. Initially it is Maggie who sees the Floss as Bunyan's river of death. The patterns have no external validation - they are the myths that the characters themselves develop to make sense of the place they find themselves occupying. The religious patterns

lose their supernatural force for their importance in the novel is not their appeal to a transcendent authority, but their power to structure a character's consciousness of self and others.

The Pilgrim's Progress is further robbed of its religious authority by the place given it as one of Maggie's favourite childhood books. The child Maggie is gripped by the story and the pictures, not by the religious message. Her response is typical of that deplored by the evangelical writer Isaac Watts:

> the book takes a great hold also of children, long before they can enter its spiritual meaning, from the interesting nature of the characters, and the vicissitudes of their journey ... [20]

Watts tried to correct this response by writing a version of the story which he hoped would make the spiritual meaning of the story plain to children too. In The Mill on the Floss Maggie's excited response to the book is not challenged on spiritual grounds. It may be immature, but it shows an imagination functioning and responsive. This is important for it is Maggie's imaginative responsiveness, disciplined by suffering, that will later help her to enter into the sufferings of others and so grow morally. The book is important because it helps to develop and direct Maggie's imagination, not because it teaches her specifically Christian truth.

Although George Eliot ignores the specifically Christian teaching in The Pilgrim's Progress the structure of the novel with its echoes of Bunyan's book at opening and

conclusion invite the reader to consider Maggie's life as a type of pilgrim's progress. Her death in the river identifies her with Christiana, visualised in her childish imagination crossing the Floss to the Celestial City. Her life can be viewed as a moral progress even if the nature of the Celestial City she attains is left in doubt. Such a view is however baffled by Maggie's failure to progress. She is, as Barbara Hardy has pointed out, essentially a static character. 'Maggie is a character who believes herself to be converted and transformed, but who is incorrigibly herself.'[21] Crises and experience modify her behaviour, but do not fundamentally alter her personality. The history of Maggie's inner life and development can be read more easily in the light of the prodigal son parable than in the light of The Pilgrim's Progress.

The prodigal son is introduced into the text almost as early as The Pilgrim's Progress. Luke, the miller's assistant (named perhaps after the evangelist in whose gospel the original parable appears) invites Maggie to see his wife's prints of 'The Prodigal Son in the costume of Sir Charles Grandison' (p 28). The events of Maggie's life can be fitted easily into the prodigal pattern. As a child her constant experience is of rebellious action followed by repentance. When she cuts her hated hair for example Tom's laughter rouses in her:

> that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul ... for Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done; with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination.
>
> (p57)

George Eliot employs the journey sequence of the prodigal son to express Maggie's movements from rebellion to repentance. Maggie runs away from home to join the gypsies and must be rescued by her father. She drifts away with Stephen and must make her way back to the Mill and her family to right the situation. Maggie's life can be seen as a recurring cycle of action and repentance expressed in journeys away from the Mill and her family and returns to them. Journeys home, even when they are difficult are times of moral strength for Maggie. In the light of this reading the lack of a true homecoming after her time as a governess is significant. She is a guest at Lucy's, at leisure, removed both from her brother and from her mother, whose position in Lucy's household is virtually that of a housekeeper. Maggie's failure to re-establish the old ties of home deprives her of moral strength and suggests a reason for her vulnerability to Stephen's advances.

Like The Pilgrim's Progress, the prodigal son is seen interpreted in Maggie's imagination as one of her personal directing myths. Her interpretation

is expressed in her dialogue with Luke over the prints.

> 'I'm very glad his father took him back again aren't you, Luke?' she said. 'For he was very sorry, you know, and wouldn't do wrong again.'
> 'Eh, Miss,' said Luke, 'he'd be no great shakes, I doubt; let's fayther do what he would for him.' That was a painful thought to Maggie, and she wished much that the subsequent history of the young man had not been left a blank.
>
> (p28)

Maggie identifies herself with the prodigal at this point because she is remorseful over Tom's dead rabbits. She longs for forgiveness and restoration with all the force of her persistent 'hunger for love'. Now, and repeatedly however Tom will turn Luke's judgement of the prodigal on her, denouncing her as incorrigably bad. The prodigal son parable stands for Maggie not as an image of repentance and restored relationships but of her feelings of guilt and pain.

Both in its use as a structure for the narrative and as an image of Maggie's predicament the Christian implications of the parable are minimised. The prodigal son is used to express a human predicament - the need felt by Maggie for forgiveness - rather than to explore the nature of God's forgiveness which is the original purpose of the parable and the use to which the motif is put in the tracts. That Maggie is influenced by Christian narratives is not intended to press the Christian claim on the reader, but to indicate that Maggie lives and interprets her life within a society moulded by the Christian tradition - the references supply the reader with the spiritual dimension in which Maggie operates rather than with a universally applicable spiritual reality.

The reader of The Mill on the Floss is invited to interpret the novel according to a number of patterns, but the selection is arbitrary; romance, hagiography, pilgrimage and the return of the prodigal are all offered as ways of reading Maggie's history. The tract insistence on the authority of narrative patterns is absent. It is noticeable that in her references to The Pilgrim's Progress George Eliot is not concerned to imitate Bunyan's allegorical style; allegory with its strictness of meaning and interpretation is not relevant to her approach to her characters' situations, they cannot be viewed as operating within a clearly defined, codable theological system. However, at the conclusion of the novel the religious patterns become more insistent. Faced with interpreting death as a solution to her heroine's predicament a more far-reaching and potentially transcendent religious framework appears to be demanded. It is in the attempt to supply this that the tension between the religious vocabulary available to George Eliot and the exploration beyond it that she wished to make becomes apparent.

Tom's and Maggie's deaths are presented as a triumphant vindication of Maggie's moral choices and of the system of morality based on the sanctity of human ties and commitments which is the heart of the book's moral statement. The original title page of the novel carried the verse used as their epitaph - a verse which suggests

the element of triumph in the conclusion, 'In their death they were not divided' (2 Samuel 11:23). However, death viewed from the perspective of the Feuerbachian ideology of the novel is difficult to reconcile with a triumphant conclusion cast in biblical language for it cannot contain the prospect of life after death as an encouragement. The verse George Eliot has selected noticeably avoids mentioning this source of encouragement - it is one of the few she could have chosen that does so. George Eliot is careful to avoid giving specific consolation of a Christian kind for the death of her characters, but as though to compensate the religious references become more insistent. Whereas earlier in the novel the different patterns were offered to the reader as alternative and essentially arbitrary ways of imposing order on the narrative George Eliot suddenly demands that the reader treats them as authoritative. The narrative structures define the way that the novel is to be read. Maggie is Christiana ending her life in the Floss which has become a river of death:

> she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death without its agony - and she was alone in the darkness with God.
>
> (p455)

With the prodigal son she achieves reconciliation and an ultimate return to childhood which has echoes of the hop-picker Bessy Collins' return to the meadows of home

> brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together
>
> (p459)

She also becomes the Virgin of St Ogg's sitting triumphantly in her boat bringing hope to those in danger in the flood:

> They sat mutely gazing at each other: Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face - Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation ... he guessed at a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort.
>
> (p458)

One reason for the discomfort that most readers experience with the conclusion is that we are asked to take seriously narrative structures whose values have been questioned and undermined in their first presentation - the history of St Ogg for example is introduced with the narrator's aside:

> I possess several manuscript versions, I incline to the briefest, since, if it should not be wholly true, it is at least likely to contain the least falsehood
>
> (p102)

With the exception of the history of the Virgin, the narrative structures that dominate the conclusion are those that have been important in Maggie's imaginative life as well as being offered by the narrator as models for the organisation of the novel as a whole. For most of the novel however, Maggie's use of models to structure her life is observed ironically. When she adopts The Imitation of Christ as a model the narrator comments:

> From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity (p256)

Maggie's various visions of herself are not allowed to become the dominant structure of the book, although they are offered as alternative ways of reading it. At the end of the novel however, Maggie's dream of playing her part with intensity is offered without irony. The world is suddenly remade as she would like it to be, as she used to dream of it being when she was a child. She acts heroically in the flood, rescues Tom and, in a dramatic climax relives an idyllic version of her childhood days with him, an idyll that, as Ulrich Knoepflmacher has pointed out, had more existence in her childish fantasies than in the reality of her history as it is presented in the novel. [22]

The increased insistence on the possible validity of the religious reference coupled with a refusal to allow Tom and Maggie any immortality beyond that accorded by human memory generates a degree of uncertainty at the end of the novel. We are uncertain because we are asked to accept as valid attitudes that elsewhere in the novel have been questioned, and also because life after death is denied for Tom and Maggie, but is nevertheless implicitly proffered by the insistence on the Pilgrim's Progress pattern.